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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 000371

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STATE FOR NEA/PD AND NEA/ARPI

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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS TACKLE CARTOON CONTROVERSY

REF: ABU DHABI 305

Classified By: AMBASSADOR MICHELE J. SISON, REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (SBU) Summary: The UAE Government ushered in the Islamic New Year February 1 with an evening of preaching that emphasized religious tolerance and moderation. However, the UAE's unified Friday sermon that preachers delivered two days later castigated the Danish media for publishing a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed and said that allowing such cartoons in the press "should be stopped by every means possible." Preachers reminded worshippers that the Prophet Mohammed was criticized during his time, but that he responded to personal attacks by treating his detractors with forgiveness and kindness. After the Friday sermon, Abu Dhabi witnessed a rare protest march that included calls for a European Union apology and a suspension of trade with the EU. End Summary.

Religious Leaders Emphasize Tolerance, Moderation

12. (U) UAE President Khalifa bin Zayed's Saudi-born religious adviser, Ali al-Hashemi al-Sayed, hosted an Islamic New Year celebration on February 1 during which he and other religious figures spoke about the need for religious tolerance and moderation in the world. He said the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten's decision to publish a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed was "regrettable." However, he said it was important that Muslims not allow themselves to be provoked by such acts particularly when other more influential Western leaders were speaking respectfully about Islam. He added that the events of 9/11 should have taught everyone about the importance of unity and understanding among religions.

13. (SBU) The religious adviser's guests included Education Minister Sheikh Nahyan, the Under Secretary for Islamic Affairs at the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs, numerous religious scholars from the UAE and Yemen, and the head of the Egyptian Coptic Church in the UAE. The latter is a frequent guest at interfaith events and sprinkles his sermons with passages from the Qur'an and the Bible. Sheikh Ali al-Jaffri, a well-known Yemeni preacher who spoke to student and civic groups in California, Florida, and the UK after 9/11, gave a stirring lecture condemning extremism and urging moderation. Al-Jaffri told Polchief after the program that Muslim preachers have an obligation to reach out to different groups -- Muslim and non-Muslim alike -- especially when Islam is misunderstood by many.

14. (U) Also present at the celebration was a son of Sheikh Mohammed Sayed Tantawi, the Grand Imam of Egypt's al-Azhar Mosque. Tantawi's son works for the UAE Ministry of Interior. Diplomatic guests included Ambassadors from the UK, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Palestine, Bosnia, Senegal, Mauritania, and Egypt. Sitting next to Polchief was one of the UAE's most famous political asylum recipients, former

Iraqi Information Minister Mohammed al-Sahhaf, aka Baghdad Bob, sporting a thick black mustache. He held a string of amber prayer beads as he listened to the sermon. At the conclusion of the sermon and prayers, as guests rose to move from the reception tent to the buffet table, al-Sahhaf placed his hand on Polchief's back and said, "Go first, please, please." The event took place under a tent erected in a flower orchard belonging to Abu Dhabi emirate's ruling al-Nahyan family, 15 minutes' drive from al-Ain.

Friday Sermons Attack Danish Cartoon

¶5. (U) The cartoon controversy was also the subject of the weekly Friday sermon drafted and distributed by the UAE's Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments. The Friday sermon text, which preachers are expected to use as guidance, noted that "the media lately have exposed some Danish newspapers offending our Messenger and mocked his character in caricatures to offend our Master. These satanic acts are an offense to Islam and all Muslims. Carrying on with such acts is an attack against religions. This act has offended and angered more than one billion Muslims around the globe. Such a behavior had come from those who pretend to be scientists and people who respect the freedom of others." The sermon went on to say that free expression did not give someone the right to publish cartoons offensive to Islam. Preachers in some mosques made the point that Prophet Mohammed responded to personal attacks by forgiving people and treating them kindly.

¶6. (SBU) The unified Friday sermon text also warned that, "Continuing to place these illustrations in newspapers is a clear attack which should be stopped by every means

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possible." The text also said that the "shameful acts" have angered 1.3 billion Muslims in the world. Muslims condemn the acts and call on scholars and thinkers of the world to stand against such shameful acts, the sermon said.

Rare Protest Targets EU

¶7. (U) After the Friday, February 3 prayers, approximately 500 people demonstrated peacefully along Abu Dhabi's stylish seafront Corniche, urging the European Union to apologize to Muslims for the offensive cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed. The protesters also called on Muslim governments to suspend all their trade with the EU. Demonstrations in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, and Ras al-Khaimah emirates received coverage in both the Arabic and English press.

¶8. (C) Comment: The Danish cartoon controversy presented the UAE's religious scholars with a dilemma. On the one hand, they wanted to give worshippers guidance on how they should react to the cartoon issue. On the other hand, they wanted also to convey the UAE's traditional sense of tolerance and moderation. Judging from the peaceful protest in Abu Dhabi and the continuing boycott of Danish products in local grocery stores, the approach appears to have had its desired effect.

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